

THE EXPERIMENTAL PROFESSOR

When **Robert Sulkin** takes photographs he adopts the persona of a mad scientist, finding obscure objects to construct unique inventions which he then captures on camera. He talks to Katherine Anker about his desire to experiment.

All images © Robert Sulkin



Construction A Opposite top Propeller bottom Prototype #3

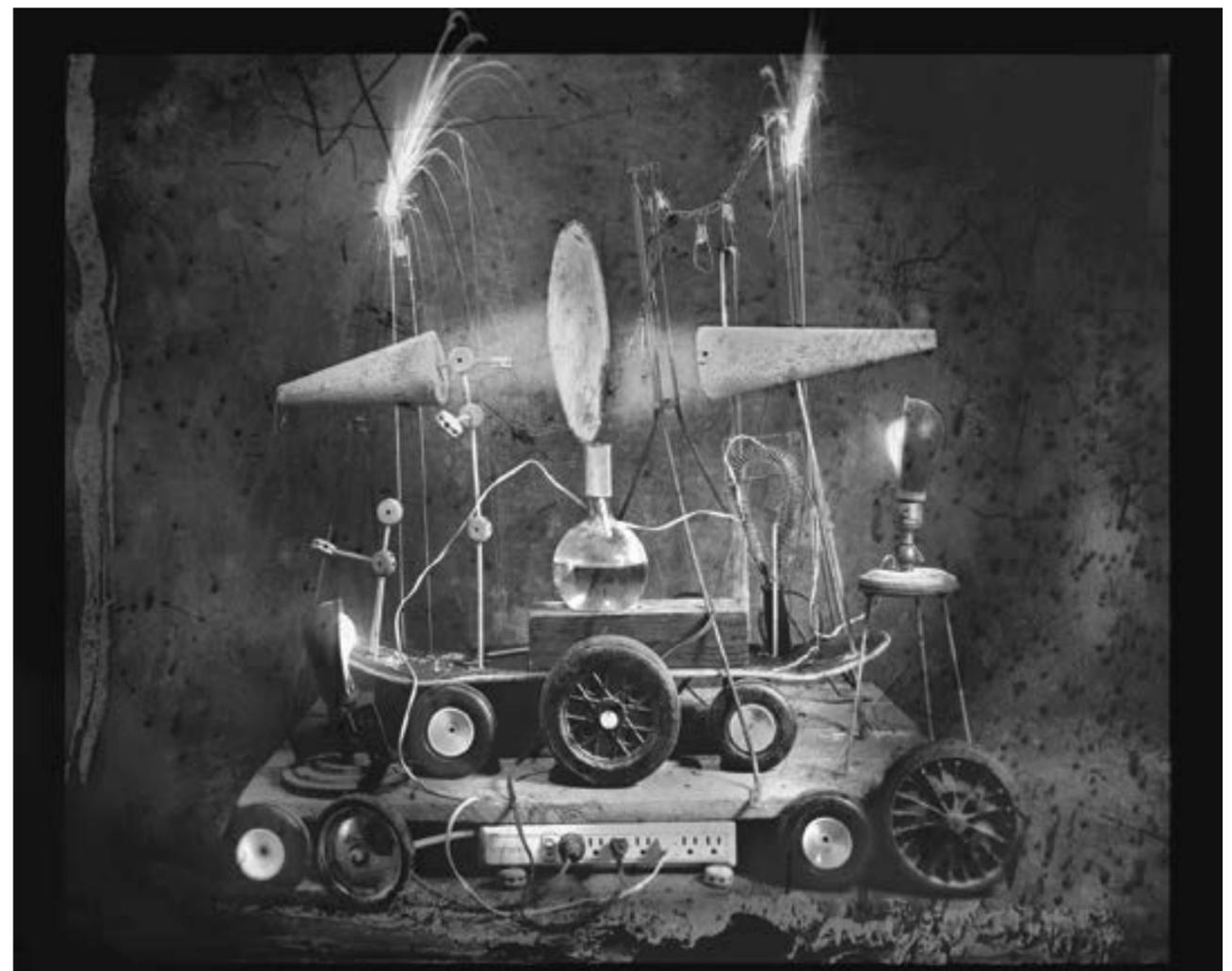
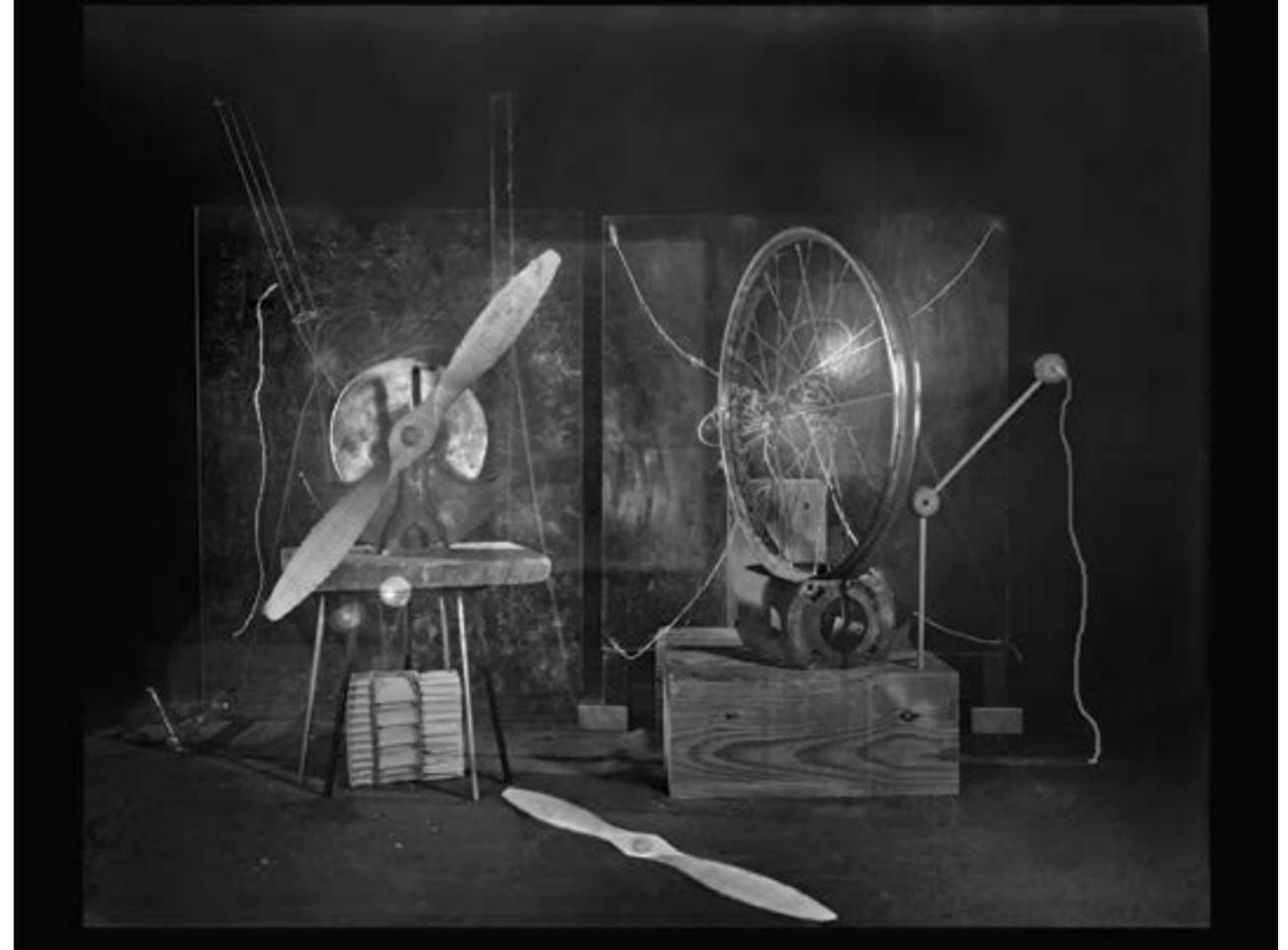
At first glance, Robert Sulkin's motifs look like the contents of a mad scientist's attic: curious contraptions with wheels and propellers that make you want to pull a lever to see what happens. But keep looking and you'll realise that every object was placed in the frame for your benefit, to create an experience you can only have from your vantage point. These are not installations, but rather constellations made for the camera.

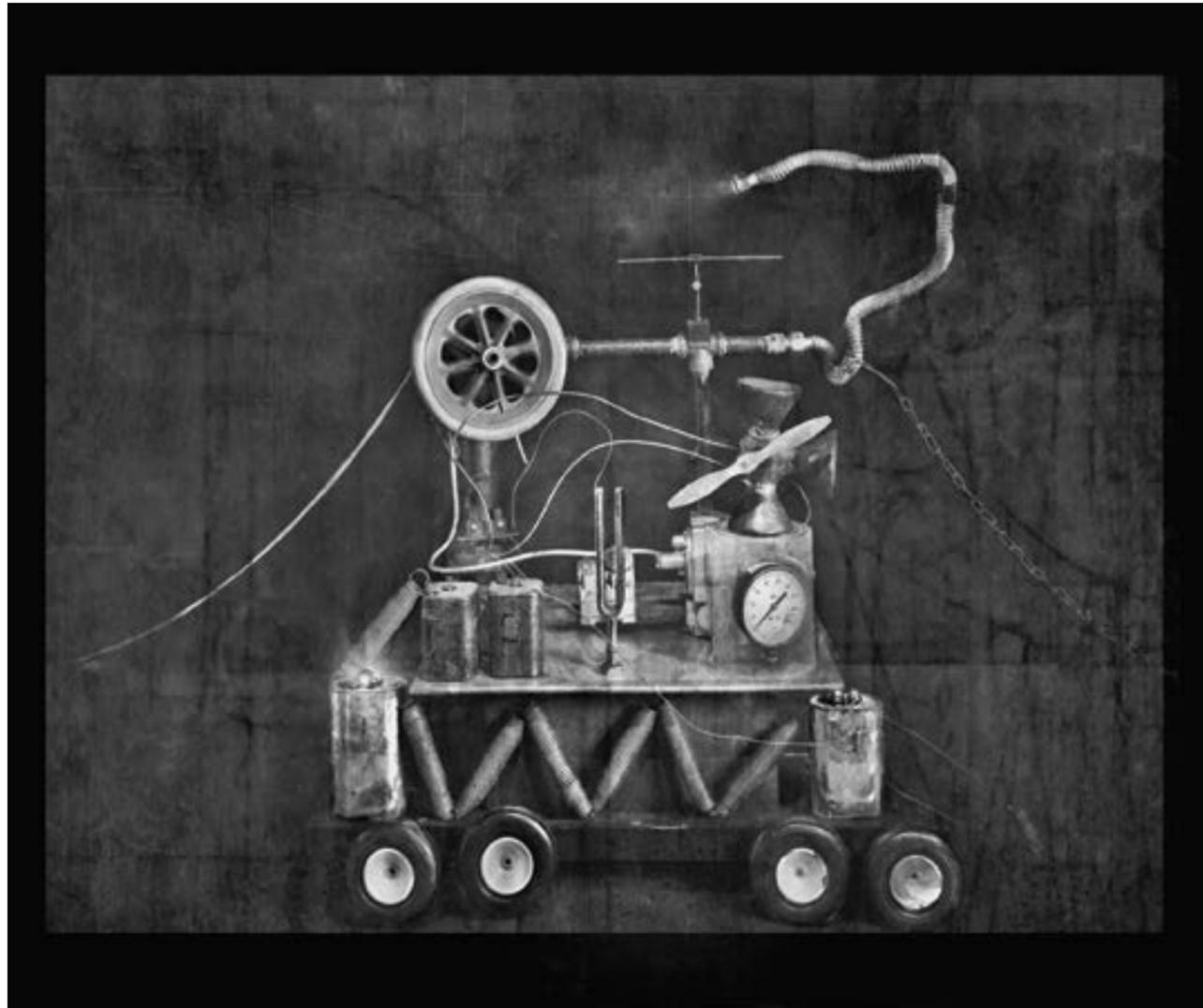
'I rely on the idea that if something works when I look at it flat, the viewer is going to project meaning on to it,' a pensive-looking Robert tells me from the United States over Skype. 'We want to accept photography as some form of reality, of evidence of something, so maybe the viewer's first reaction is to ask: "What is it? Is it real? Where was it?" Over time, they realise that it is what it is. There is no external meaning whatsoever.'

With that statement, the scene is set for an interesting chat. If we'd been geographically closer I might have asked Robert if I could

join him for a day in his hometown of Roanoke in Virginia. First we would roam the streets, looking for old, discarded objects on pavements and combing the charity shops for props that might pass as a spare part of an eccentric inventor's latest project. The stranger the object, the better, Robert tells me. 'If I bring an object to the register in a charity shop and the cashier says, "What is it?" I know it's a good object,' he says.

Next, we'd head to Robert's working space where he'd get into character. He'd pretend to be an inventor or a misinformed >





Prototype #1

Opposite Firewheel

or uneducated scientist, perhaps developing a new form of alternative fuel technology. 'I'm some sort of adventurer and I'm very serious. I've got to somehow help the culture in some way with what I'm doing,' he tells me. Working on a 4x8ft table with his view camera set up in a fixed position, he adds and removes elements, constantly keeping in mind that the final result will be seen from one vantage point. He avoids using recognisable shapes and branded objects. 'Things like toothpaste or Coca Cola cans give the viewer an external reference. The things I use gain meaning by association with other elements in the set-up,' he explains.

Much like his back and forth, experimental approach in the studio,

'The teaching and artwork are symbiotic, then feed on one another. I get excited when students do things that are good and that makes me want to go to my studio.'

Robert's post-processing routine is a result of personal experimentation. He scans the 4x5 negatives from his Zone IV wooden field camera and uses Photoshop to add surface scratches or scribble words and numbers across the image, making it look like a scientist's notes on a work in progress. Sometimes he adds a touch of authenticity

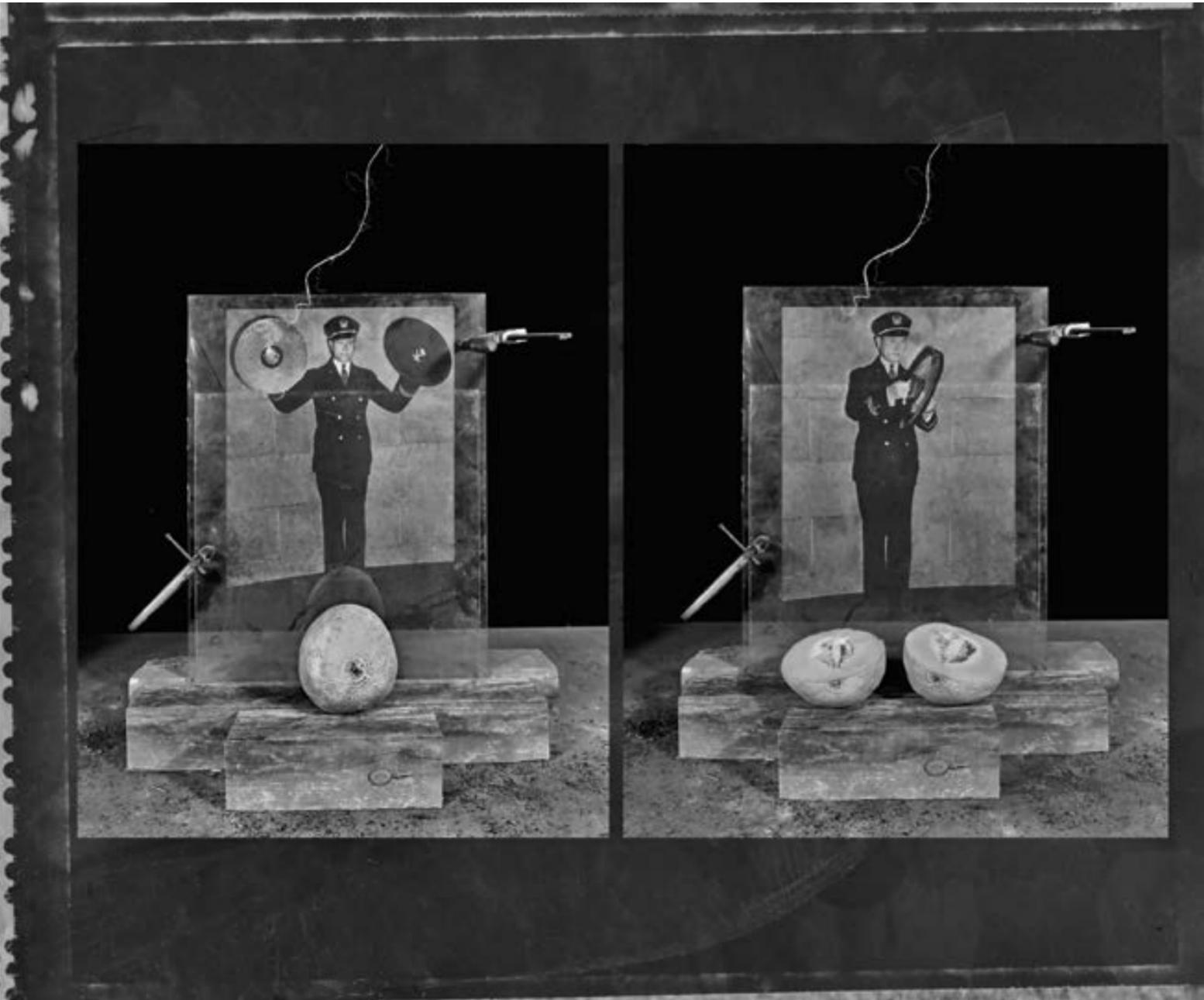
with the help of a collection of early 20th century lantern slides. He scans the glass slides and layers them over his images in post-production, turning the mount of the slide into a frame for his constellation. 'I'm hoping that it gives them more of a sense of authority, making them look like they were something real that you've come across in the basement of a museum,' he says.

The prints are kept relatively small at 14x17in, adding to that sense of authenticity. 'I've been tempted at times to make larger prints, but the images seem to invite closer inspection, so I think the viewer being able to be close to them physically helps,' he says. 'Besides, they seem like they're something from the past. When I started in photography, 14x17in was a large print.' >

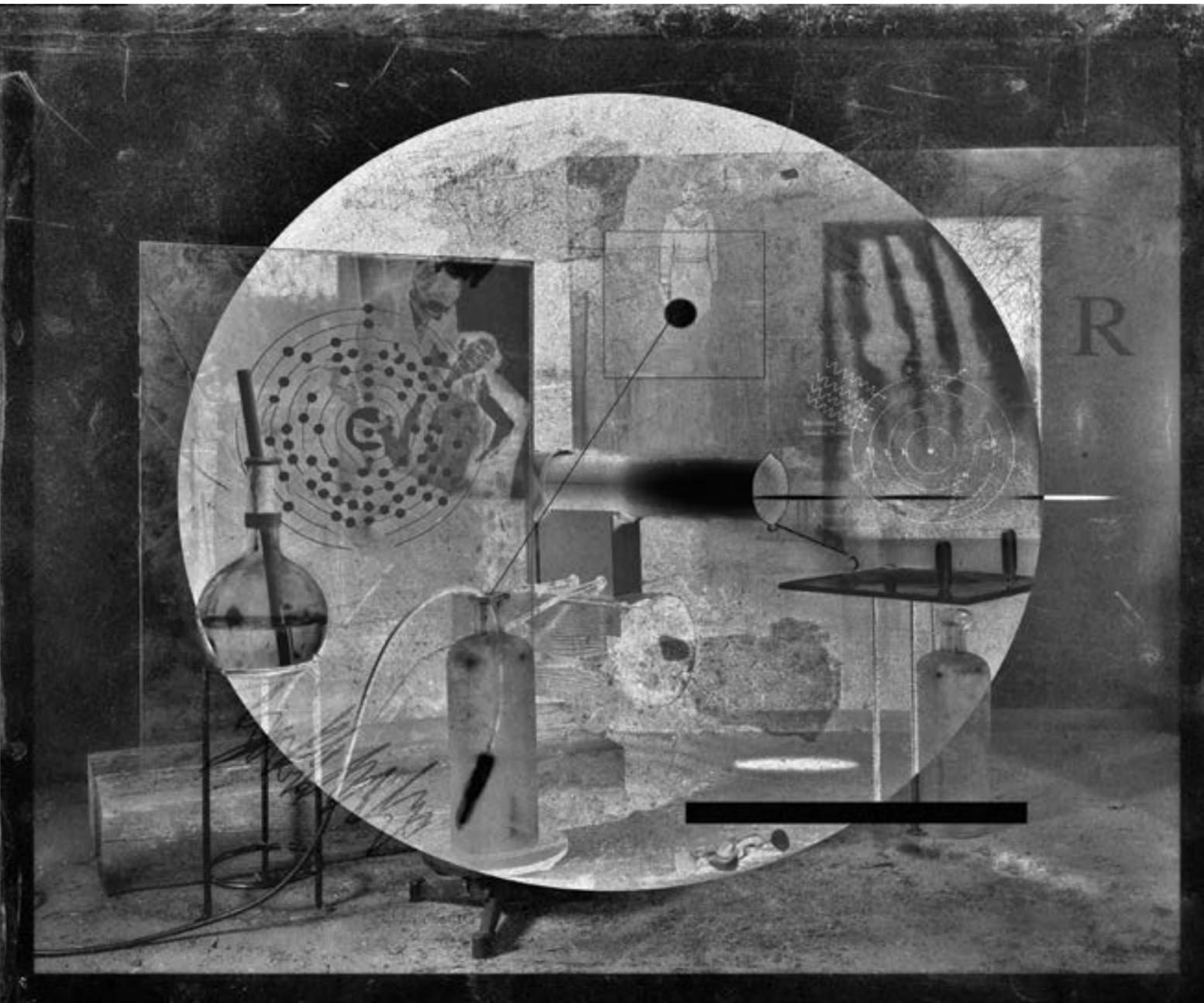
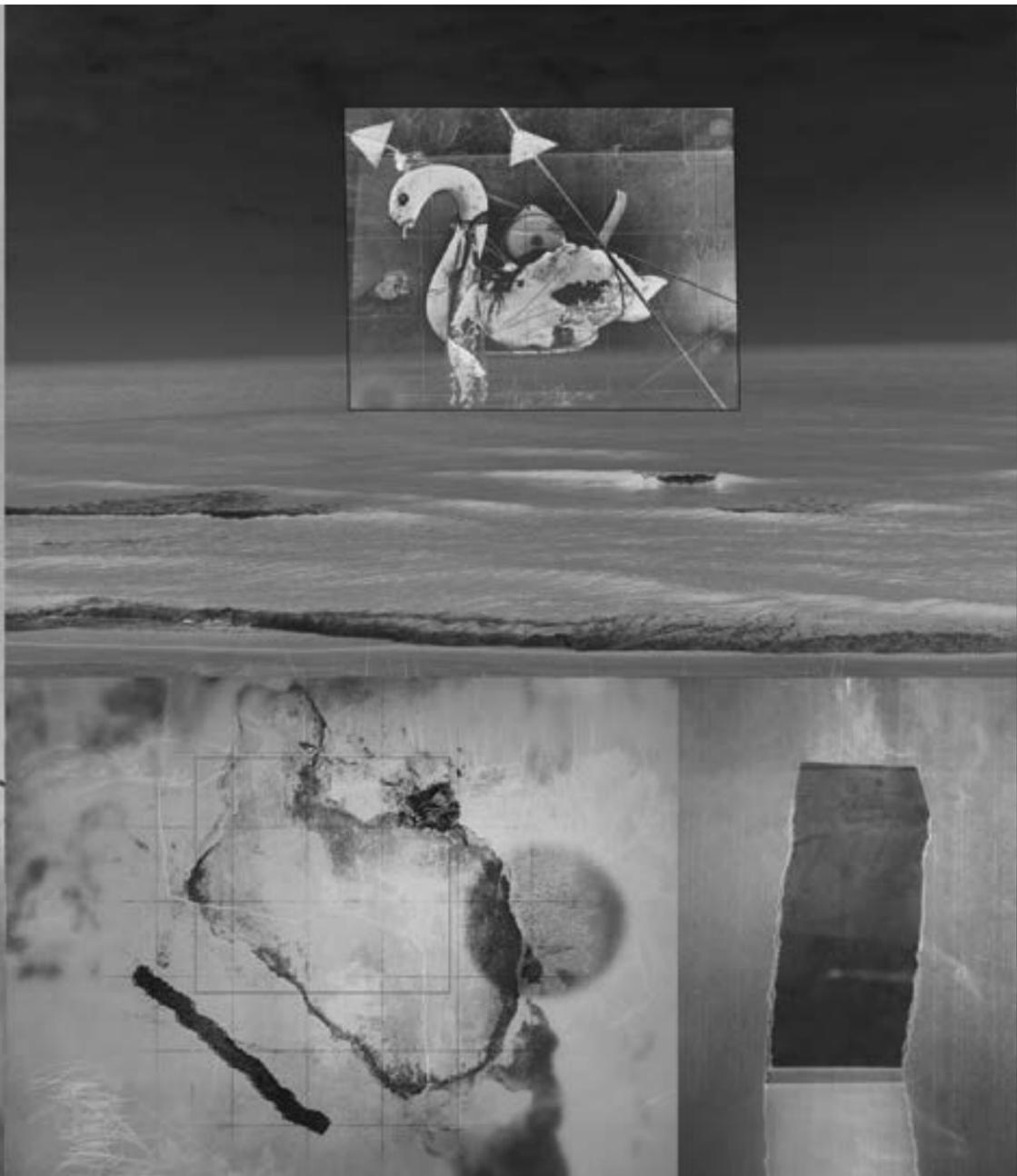




Collage #18



Experiment #12



Collage #14

Ode to M. Curie

When Robert entered the world of art as a student at the University of Iowa in the early 1970s, most photography was about giving expression to what was out there, be it in the form of Ansel Adams' landscapes or Edward Weston's objects, or the social documentary photography of Robert Frank. 'The idea that you would fabricate something to make your own image would have been a huge no-no,' Robert recalls. Instead, he turned to modern European artists for inspiration. Marcel

Duchamp had presented found everyday objects as art, and two conceptual artists, Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, influenced Robert with their book *Evidence*, a collection of found photography from police labs presented with no explanations or back stories. 'I loved the idea that the art would be non-referential. That the experience of an abstract painting occurred inside the frame,' he says. 'That's a quality I took on in my own work.'

Since 1980, Robert has taught at the fine art

department of Hollins University in Roanoke, a private college for women. He defines his career as a teacher as one of the biggest current influences on his artwork. 'The teaching and artwork are symbiotic, then feed on one another. I get excited when students do things that are good and that makes me want to go to my studio.' Art schools are also his favourite places to exhibit his work, despite his CV being sprinkled with solo shows in prestigious museums and art galleries. 'Colleges usually intend to show work that

can engage students and defy more limited expectations. My work is a bit unusual, and when colleges invite me to have a show they see that quality in my work and they want to challenge the students. This isn't what you see on Facebook or Instagram.'

But challenging the viewer comes with its own obstacles, Robert admits. 'I've always thought my work was not very accessible. I stayed away from familiar genres of photography such as landscape and tried to trot my own path, and that makes my work

a little bit obscure and almost embarrassing to show people.' Surprised, I ask Robert whether he is really embarrassed to show off his work. 'Well, maybe discomfort is a better word,' he replies. 'When I was younger, if I was showing someone my work, I'd be very anxious because it wasn't immediately obtainable. When we look at something, we relate it to something that's familiar to us. If you're looking at something that's less familiar there's an entry process to it, and new experiences aren't always comfortable.'

Then again, this source of discomfort – confronting your audience with something new – simultaneously challenges us and rewards our efforts as artists. As Robert says, 'I'm proud of the idea that other people might be able to relate to the work on some level. It's about communication – I know my work's not for everybody but if some people can experience it in some way, for what I do that's pretty good.'

To see more of Robert Sulkin's work go to: robertsulkin.com